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ABSTRACT

Eric Campbell, an English teacher, spent most of his working life in New Guinea and in East Africa, where he lived in the shadow of Kilimanjaro. He now lives in England and writes about Africa. People could expect an objective, and perhaps, a dispassionate account or depiction of African children and adults--their individual lives and sociocultural functions in a true geopolitical and sociocultural milieu in the 1990s--from a British writer and teacher reminiscent of another British teacher and writer, William Golding. But what a reader finds particularly in reading "The Year of the Leopard Song" is a disappointment. This paper discusses and analyzes Campbell's 1992 novel for children. The paper sees the novel as a deliberate continuation and revival of the misplaced old stereotypes of the barbaric and evil Africans. It states that in a children's literature course students can learn more about ideology and how the aesthetic practices of literary representation transform culture than in any other course they may take--they see how ideas of capitalism and imperialism get welded to moral imperatives in turn-of-the-century boys' adventure fiction, creating an ideal imperial subject itching for travel and conquest in the services of God and country. The paper notes that the functional nature of children's literature is to bring the world together in true brotherhood and sisterhood. It finds that international understanding and cooperation cannot be possible through "racist books" like Eric Campbell's "The Year of the Leopard Song." (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Racism in African Children's Literature: A Critique of Eric Campbell's *The Year of the Leopard Song*

Presented at Versions and Subversions: International Conference on African Literatures, Humboldt University, Berlin Germany, May 2002

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> Books for young people are the main cultural nourishment for our youth . For this reason they must send messages and teachings of humanism and altruism, love for the lofty principles of freedom, justice and democracy, respect for moral values and longing for universal fraternization and peace in the world...Providing good books to the children of the world is conducive to the creation of a better future for mankind.
>
> (Spyros Kyprianou, 1984)

Any book that deliberately does the opposite of the spirit of the above words in the name of contributing to children's and youth literature or the humanities is open to a lot of speculation as to why it was produced at all, and who wrote it. However, some of such books do exist, and one example is Eric Campbell's novel for children and young people, *The Year of the Leopard Song* (1992). Having spent most of his working life in

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Papua New Guinea and in East Africa where he lived in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, Eric Campbell, an English teacher presently living in England, now writes about Africa, particularly, East Africa, with some modicum of first hand experience. He is definitely not like Edgar Rice Burrough who wrote all the Tarzan saga when he did not visit Africa one day in his lifetime. Also, he is not like Joseph Conrad who briefly visited Congo in central Africa--the visit reflected in his classic, *Heart of Darkness*. Burrough died on March 19, 1950 , apparently while reading a Tarzan comic (Watson 2001) and Joseph Conrad passed on early in the same century. But their works live on.

When Joseph Conrad was a boy in the 1860s and 1870s much of Africa was still unknown to Europeans but that has changed with technological progress. It is this relatively known Africa that Eric Campbell lived in. Today, Africa is visible to a certain extent, in international media, and it is a discipline focus of various colleges and universities. Also the old stereotypes about the continent as seen through Tarzan books and movies are dying out steadily. However, at 90, with more than 40movies and dozens of novels behind him, Edgar Rice Burroughs' apeman is still going strong (Watson, 2001). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* centenary conference was held March 1998 at Potchefstrom and Capetown, South Africa, the first international gathering of Conradians on the continent (Nakai, 2000).

Unlike Burrough and Conrad, Campbell is still alive. One would expect an objective, and perhaps, a dispassionate account or depiction of African children and adults—their individual lives and sociocultural functions in a true geopolitical and sociocultural millieu in the 1990s from a British writer and teacher—one reminiscent of

another British school teacher and writer, William Golding. But what one finds particularly in reading *The Year of the Leopard Song* is a disappointment.

When a writer has lived in Africa and writes about it as the other—the exotic, particularly at this time of globalization and multiculturalism , something more wilful than mere entertainment is at work. It is a deliberate continuation and revival of the of the misplaced old stereotypyes of the barbaric and evil African. Last year, the publishers in America sent me the last two copies and indicated to me that it was going out of print probably because of its offensive nature.

Why is it going out of print in America? Copyright dates can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date of course, is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published...In a period of rapid change and new consciousness, when children's book publishing is attempting to be relevant, it is becoming increasingly significant (Paul, 149). Published in 1992., *The Year of the Leopard Song* is akin to being regarded as a descendant of the likes of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—novels written long ago in the late 19th and early 20th centuries about Africa from a onesided limited point of view by those who did not really live on the African continent. Is it not surprising that a work of this nature can still be published and given some modicum of appraisal by some critics and reviewers in the 1990s—the last decade of the last century?

Chinua Achebe's scathing essay, "An Image of Africa" clearly demonstrates a reading of *Heart of Darkness* from a different perspective, squarely putting it in the category of racist novels. But for some western critics like Robert Hampson, "Conrad is

not presenting an image of Africa but rather Marlow's attempt to understand and represent that experience. Marlow is a fictional character whose consciousness operates according to contemporary codes and categories. If Marlow's perceptions are at times racist, it is because those codes and conventions were racist" (p.xxx-xxxi) . No matter the degree of Marlow's racist conceptions, and the author's stylys tic ploy to dissociate himself from Marlow, Conrad cannot completely cut himself off from him and his thought. Unlike *Heart of Darkness, The Year of the Leopard Song* poses no real pain in finding out the stance of its author.

In a children's literature course (or children's literature books) students can learn more about ideology and how the aesthetic practices of literary representation transform culture than in any other course they may take...They see how ideas of capitalism and imperialism get welded to moral narratives in turn-of-the-century boys' adventure fiction, creating an ideal imperial subject itching for travel and conquest in the services of God and country (Coats, 2001). *School Library Journal* and Mary Chelton , a reviewer of *The Year of the Leopard Song*, do not seem to sense the subtle and sometimes blunt offensive racism in the novel. *School Library Journal* describes the novel as "a gripping adventure story", and it is inscribed on the cover of the book, perhaps for commercial reasons—to appeal to those who like adventure tales; and according to Mary Chelton, "the mystery of Africa itself" (275) is the novel's underlying point. As far as she is concerned, no matter how long Europeans live on the African continent they cannot understand the real heart and throb of the continent. They will always remain outsiders—"despite their feeling more 'African' than European they are still not aware of the mystery of Africa." One might be tempted to ask, what is this so-

called "mystery of Africa"? Is Africa not on this planet earth like other continents? For Mary Chelton in her eurocentric review, "the book offers insights into what Africans of European descent can feel like" but she does not consider what insight the book offers about what indigenous but dispossessed Africans can feel like.

Do all Africans of European descent who decide to live in various African countries like Kenya , South Africa, or Zimbabwe feel the way Chelton opines they do? Campbell lived in Tanzania or in Kenya or in some other parts of East Africa, perhaps, without going to West Africa where he probably feared mosquitoes and malaria would have dealt with him. Is residence in one part of the continent enough for anyone or even a writer to make a sweeping generalization about the continent? Here is Eric Campbell's writing about Africans, tourists, and time at the international airport in Nairobi when his son arrives from England:

> All around him (Alan) tourists unaware that time is flexible in Africa, were becoming impatient with baggage handlers and custom officers. They were upsetting only themselves; *patience is not a virtue in Africa, it is a way of life.* (p.5)

Is patience a vice then if it is not a way of life? Or is Campbell saying that a major way to keep one's sanity in Africa is to be patient always, or is he maintaining that every African is habitually patient in very trying circumstances or in the face of all odds? In Shakespeare's words, boundless intemperance in nature is tyranny. While patience is cherished, it is not in all situations, particularly when things are at a standstill or progressing at a very unnecessarily slow rate; and not every African is patient. In short, patience is not a way of life in Africa. Is Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall*

Apart patient with less successful and slow people in his family or in the whole of Umuofia? Beside his dogged determination to excel in traditional Umuofia, his impatience with lazy and idle people is in part responsible for his fame which "rested on solid personal achievement." Achievement by patient or impatient people is revered by many Africans. Campbell's "patience is a way of life in Africa" can only be taken with a grain of salt.

In another generalization by the author, he has Alan Edwards ruminate over the changed atmosphere in his father's coffee plantation by sharing this thought:

> There are things out there, beyond the farm fence, that no expatriate could ever know about; not even one like Alan, who had been born here and lived almost all his days here.
>
> Africans extended the warm hand of friendship to pull you in, but they didn"t pull you in all the way. Only as far as they wanted you to come. Some doors would always remain closed though you knocked on them to the end of time.(.21)

This does not need elaboration. Did Africans extend a hand of friendship when they were tricked by Europeans long ago into signing dubious treaties that robbed them of their property and dignity? Perhaps they did out of friendship and trust but found out later that the same friendship and trust were meaningless. Alan has apparently forgotten that even the "door" to growing a coffee crop was closed to Africans prior to the struggle for Kenyan independence (Maddy and MacCann, 24). The door to cultivating pyrethrum flowers was also closed to Africans in Ngugi wa ThiongO's *Weep Not, Child.*

Eric Campbell writes about the vast African continent as if he knows it all. His Africa is couched in evil and dark terms. Seeing a headless chicken on his property when the African workers or peasants are beginning their traditional ritual of the leopard song, John Edwards has the following sordid thought:

> The *darkness* was beginning again, as it had in his father's generation, and the generation before that and, for all he knew, for countless other generations. The *darkness* of violence and tribal magic that had made the first white men speak of "*darkest* Africa.." A *darkness* not of the land itself –of impenetrable jungle or unexplored vastness—but the *darkness* in the hearts of men. (my emphasis , 63)

In the above excerpt, Eric Campbell seems obsessed with "darkness" and all its connotations. One might argue that it is John Edwards's thinking or reasoning and not that of the author, but the whole novel is Campbell's creation. His creation of John Edward and his thought recalls the wording of Joseph Conrad's title, *Heart of Darkness* . Chinua Achebe has uncovered and given an indepth discussion of the racism in *Heart of Darkness,* a novel which for many years has remained and still remains a classic of literature. And the racism in *The Year of the Leopard Song* is not difficult to ferret. Is it the heart of the African that has been dark from time immemorial and still remains dark?

Eric Campbell writes about his fantasy Chagga tribe as if it is representative of the continent. Africa is a heterogenous continent and not a homogenous one. No one can really say that any author is objective in his/her writing. What really qualifies or recommends Campbell to write this novel beside his living in East Africa and in Papua New Guinea, perhaps as a white settler like Howlands in Ngugi wa ThiongO's *Weep Not, Child?* According to Donnarae MacCann and Amadu Maddy (1996), his own indoctrination , given such circumstances, may have left him ill-prepared to address African history and culture in unbiased terms. This novel is "Campbellcentric" mirroring only his perspective of the so called Africa and the Africans he knew. This is why Amadu Maddy and Donnarae MacCann as well as many other rational people are surprised at "the way cultural imperialism still flourishes in the 1990s in the world of children's books" (137). Certainly, generalizations in the novel are onesided and decidedly racist.

When Jella Lepman, the German Jew who escaped Nazi Germany and returned after the war in an American army uniform exhibited numerous non-German books for book hungry German youngsters in 1946, barely a year after World War ll in Munich, Germany, her noble intention was to expose young German minds to other cultures thereby building a bridge of understanding among various diverse different and farflunged cultures through children's books which hitherto had been lacking—a disconnect which was in part responsible for the horrors of WW ll. It is this simple book exhibition that gradually metamorphosed into the International Youth Library (Internationale Jugendbibliothek) in Munich in 1948. It is today the world's foremost library devoted to the systematic development and study of world children's literatures

promoting international cooperation and understanding. That it still exists today is proof of the great vision of Jella Lepman. She later established the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) to bring together for dialogue and sharing, all those connected with the production of books for children and young people—parents, teachers, librarians, writers, illustrators, and editors. Today, the IBBY biannual congress draws together all the world's players in the production of children's books not just for gathering and intellectual exercise but for continued exploration of avenues and possibilities for world peace. In fact, the IBBY congress held in New Delhi, India, toward the end of the last century was devoted to the theme, "Children's Books for Peace." It was in the 19th Congress in Nicosia Cyprus that Spyros Kyprianou made the lofty statement—the epigraph that I started with.

On all counts then, the functional nature of children's literature to bring the world together in true brotherhood and sisterhood is entrenched in the activities of the International Youth Library, and in other similar institutions like the Swedish Institute for Children's Books, the International Institute for Children's Literature, Osaka, Japan, and other major institutions devoted to the development and study of literature for children. But international understanding and cooperation cannot be possible through racist books like Eric Campbell's *The Year of the Leopard Song*.

During shameful era of slavery the relationship was typically master-slave or master-servant—the exploiter and the exploited. No one can definitively say that the exploited was happy and satisfied. It is not really in human nature to work completely for the benefit of another. But in quite a number of literary works about that period and

even beyond, the black man—the African in the new world was depicted as a happy go lucky fun loving person. In the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris, the famed Georgian journalist, Uncle Remus is depicted as a contented happy slave who enjoys entertaining his young audience, the son of his white master, with his stories.

Almost three hundred years later, Eric Campbell essentially paints the same picture in his *The Year of the Leopard Song*. He presents an old man, Njombo, Kimathi's father, as a contented individual in the service of a white settler, John Edwards. He depicts him as "the family house servant" that Maddy and MacCann describe as "a usable commodity in a colonial setting" (16). Their description is not far fetched. The novel is replete with echoes of European colonialism of the past, and it seems to justify it.

All the men in Chagga village are wiped out for carrying out their ritual of their harmonius link with nature. The women and children desert their homes and John Edwards the coffee plantation owner comes back to life with a new group of African laborers presumably in the 1990s. The coffee slopes rang to the sound of voices once more (p.191). Is this indeed another pacification of the primitive or modern tribes of Kenya or East Africa in modern times?

Good literature usually paints for the reader memorable characters, and this point assumes more significance especially in children's literature. Young readers need to identify positively with role models or loathe reprehensible characters in books. Eric Campbell presents the central youth character, Kimathi, , as different from other humans in his possession of six fingers and six toes. And he makes much out of it in drawing readers' attention to his so called English friend, Alan Edward's unawareness

of it. Alan has just returned from England and Kimathi picks him up in Alan's father's landrover at the Nairobi International Airport:

> And because he had grown up with this boy, because he was so accustomed to him, because his every feature was as familiar to him as his own, Alan did not notice anymore the strange genetic trick that had given the hand he was watching five fingers and one thumb. (p.7)

In the 1990s, Eric Campbell knows it is offensive to paint an African out of a Caliban or Old Gagool of Rider Hagard into literature. Instead he subtly does it by giving this youngster of his own invented or imagined Chagga tribe, five fingers and a thumb. His "imposition" or his own "genetic trick" of five fingers and a thumb on young Kimathi is his prelude to the eventual transformation of this boy into an animal, a leopard.

The separation between human animalness and animal humanness can be drawn as a delicate line and the fantasy writer has long been adept at tangling and untangling that line with spellbinding effects. However, in fiction about Africa, the beast has other connotations: the " beast' is the so called cannibalistic African residing in an untamed landscape; also, the "beast" is the beast of burden, the peon working happily in the fields of the European colonizer (Maddy and MacCann, 1996). One should remember that Kenya and many other African countries had their political independence from colonial European powers in the 1960s—some had a slow and gradual transition without bloodshed but Kenya had a bloody one which the red in its national flag reflects.

Kenya's bloody fight for independence is popularly known in history as Mau Mau—Kenya during the emergency in the fifties.

To Africans, the Mau Mau fighters were freedom fighters but to many of the colonizers they were terrorists. One of the most prominent Kenya fighters during the emergency in the fifties was Dedan Kimathi whose gallantry and intelligence essentially made him a legend.. Kenya's history is incomplete without Dedan Kimathi. Does Eric Campbell's name, "Kimathi, " which hegives to the boy with six fingers not recall this gallant hero, Dedan Kimathi? Eric Campbell's statement in the novel, " The Leopard Cult was rising in this generation just as it had in the last. The tribes were demanding blood as they had in the 1950s" (52) makes his intention abundantly clear—to distort in racist garb, Kenya's history while demonizing Kenya's freedom fighters particularly Dedan Kimathi. Sometimes, however, he tries to avoid the fact that he is writing about Kenya. For example, the chief of Police, Makayowe, who is caricatured as a brute, mentions getting a helicopter from Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania, and not from Nairobi, capital of Kenya to save Alan from death in Chagga people's hands. His attempt at veiling the identity of Kenya as the country he is dealing with fails. It is Kenya that is associated with Mau Mau, and it is Kenya that produced Dedan Kimathi.

Young Kimathi in Eric campbell's novel was born with six fingers and six toes sealing his fate. He is the one destined to execute his white friend in the year of the leopard—a time when the Chagga tribespeople reaffirm their connection to their animal brothers, a time when the chosen one must heed the call of the ancient Song. Campbell's choice of the youth, Kimathi. to kill his tight white friend could be interpreted as his way of indicating that friendship or understanding is impossible between young Africans

and young English people, thereby suggesting remotely its impossibility in the next generation. His description of Alan Edward and his predisposition in his dogged search for his friend, Kimathi, is in the best of light while his description of Kimathi and his predisposition is in bestial terms:

> And so he climbed , body wracked with effort but
> mind filled with a single shining thought.
> And above him the leopard paced, raging with impatience,
> mouth salivating, with his own single thought. (p.183)

This juxtaposition of noble mind and bestial mind with opposite missions is racist .

A book like Campbell's, filled with racism and stereotypes, sends wrong messages particularly to children and young people who out of innocence and inexperience might get it all wrong. In short the *The Year of the Leopard Song* is toxic waste for young minds. It negates the spirit and vision of Jella Lepman in the founding of the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany, and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), and it turns upside down President Spyros Kyprianpou's positive and affirmative thinking about children's books which I started with. Is it surprising that it is now out of print in America?

In analyzing the weakness and limitation of *The Year of the Leopard Song*, we sadly confront the subversive attitude toward education. A teacher who is supposed to be a source of enlightenment is a source of darkness. In fact what makes one uneasy about the sordid racism in this novel is that it is the work of a professional English

teacher. To a certain extent Campbell can be considered a subverter of education and its principles. One wonders about what Campbell taught and how he related to his students and colleagues while he was a school teacher or an ordinary person in East Africa. Unlike William Golding who as a teacher got to know youngsters and their thinking well enough to engage in producing *Lord of the Flies* which essentially corrects the excesses of Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, Eric Campbell as a teacher is definitely not a gifted one like Golding who looked beyond skin color and nationalism to probe the essence of homo sapiens. In fact, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* subverts the optimistic tone of *Coral Island*.

Golding draws his classic, *Lord of the Flies* to a close in a moving scene of Ralph weeping for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart (not the darkness of the heart of British or that of Africans) and the violent death of his dear friend Piggy in the hands of a steadily degenerating beast, Roger. That *Lord of the Flies* still remains an intriguing reading today after its publication almost 50 years ago in 1954, is a testimony to its richness. Unlike Golding, Campbell lacks sensitivity and does not have a good grasp of the psychology of young people. Thinly disguised here as an adventure story, *The Year of the Leopard Song* is ideologically repugnant. It is a pure racist material which depicts Africa and Africans as the exotic other-- a banal caricature of a novel and an odious work that has nothing deep to offer in terms of serious and indepth analysis of human nature but stunted prejudice and poison that should have no place on any bookshelf meant particularly for children and young people.

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